March 1999
The FrontLine Supervisor

Q. Persons addicted to alcohol and drugs sometimes get into crises and even life-threatening circumstances. Many then refuse to see the need for treatment. Doesn't this prove that alcoholics or addicts really don't want help?

A. Longstanding myths about alcoholism and drug addiction influence the public's view of addictive disease. Your question is subtly rooted in one of these myths — the myth that alcoholics and addicts should easily recognize the disease (self-diagnose) when they have problems. The nature of denial prevents self-diagnosis, which is a decision that addiction exists. Crisis might frighten some into experimenting with reduced use, abstinence, or ineffective treatment. However, like most persons who aren't addicted, those with addiction have a definition of the problem that does not include themselves. Trying harder not to have problems is the most commonly self-imposed intervention. Of course, failure is virtually assured. Education after admission to treatment, or an effective self-help program is what makes self-diagnosis emerge. Fear of real or imagined consequences for not accepting effective help is what motivates admission. This is why workplace intervention and EAPs work so well.

Q. I'm feeling "out of the loop." I've known my employee personally for more than ten years. Still, the EAP gives me only limited information with the signed release form. Isn't this a bit rigid?

A. Standard practices of employee assistance provide that only essential information with a release is passed to the supervisor who manages the employee's performance. Generally, this does not include details of the problem or treatment. If you know the employee well, not receiving more details could cause you to feel neglected. This is particularly true if you have relied upon knowledge of the employee's personal problems in your supervision decisions. Beyond privacy laws and ethics involving confidentiality, perception that the EAP keeps personal information strictly confidential to the fullest extent of the law is crucial to your program's success. In fact, perception is as important as reality in this regard. Discuss your concern about not having more information with your EAP so you can better understand this principle. Remember that your employee might

share more information with you, but probing for such information is not appropriate.

Q. I'm too busy and overwhelmed to write down, document, find the proper words for, and keep track of performance problems of my employees. Do you have any tips on doing this more painlessly?

A. Documenting performance problems is a frustrating task for many supervisors, which might explain why more don't do it earlier. Break the task into parts using the following technique. First, eliminate distractions so you can focus. Then, write the following categories on a piece of paper: quality of work, conduct and attitude, availability and attendance, and work rules. (Almost anything you need to document will fit under these headings.) Next, establish a period of time to document and track your concerns under these four categories — a few weeks perhaps, but you decide. As you document events, consider time, date, specifics of an employee's action, and its negative impact. After a few weeks, you should have the information you need to construct a memo or use the information in a corrective interview. Don't forget to refer to the EAP if either of these steps is taken.

Q. I think my employees could use some stress management training. Can the EAP provide this service? Also, with all the different types of stress management techniques available, how do I know that whatever is provided will be what my employees need?

A. Most EAPs can arrange stress management training programs. As you indicate, there are many different approaches to this type of practical education. Here's how to plan ahead for the best experience. Contact your EA professional to discuss your work group members and their needs. Discuss the type of work, unique stresses, interpersonal communication issues, and what's unique about the work group. This will allow the trainer to decide what type of training material is most appropriate. Those who have practiced the techniques they teach give the best training and offer a more energetic presentation. In good stress management training, employees learn new techniques that become part of their future routine in managing stress on or off the job.

Q. How do I construct a memorandum to my employee that asks for changes in attendance patterns or performance that have been problematic? I'm feeling a need to go to this next step after innumerable requests for change.

A. Here is a suggested format for this type of memorandum. Avoid being "wordy," but include the following: 1) a statement of concern and a detailed explanation of the problem; 2) the specific negative effects of the problem on the workplace and/or coworkers; 3) the specific changes you desire, and when you expect to see them; 4) a statement of support or validation that lets the employee know he or she is valued for work well done, but that changes must be made (this reduces defensiveness and helps you appear objective); 5) an invitation to the employee to seek clarification on the request for changes; 6) a list of resources in the organization, if appropriate, that can help the employee (refer to the EAP based on performance); and 7) a follow-up plan. End by thanking the employee for giving attention to your expectations.